DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 363 548 SO 023 412

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TITLE Gender Equity and Gender Bias in the Middle School Classroom.
PUB DATE Apr 93
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Atlanta, GA, April 12-16, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Environment; Educational Research; Grade 6; Grade 7; Grade 8; Junior High Schools; Junior High School Students; *Middle Schools; Sex; *Sex Bias; Sex Discrimination; *Sex Fairness; *Sex Stereotypes; Student Participation; *Teacher Attitudes; Textbook Content
IDENTIFIERS Connecticut; Middle School Students

ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to begin to examine middle school classrooms for examples of either gender equity or gender bias. Data were collected by visiting 80 classes in 10 middle schools in central Connecticut. Classes observed included 6th, 7th, and 8th grade classes in social studies, mathematics, science, language arts, foreign language, health, and an assortment of electives. The research team members noted teacher behaviors, student participation, textbooks, other instructional materials, and room decorations and displays. Of the 80 classes observed, gender ratios were determined for 64. Of the 64 classes 26 could be categorized as equitable. Another 25 were male-dominated, while only 13 were female-dominated. Surprisingly, mathematics classes in the sample appeared to be the most equitable, while language arts classes showed the most extreme male domination. Science, social studies, health, and foreign languages fell somewhere in between. Of 41 incidents that could be categorized as sexist, six were related to the book in use, and were examples of embedded discrimination or sex role stereotyping. The other 35 incidents were related directly to teacher practices. Posters hung by the teachers in rooms pictured only male scientists, historical figures, athletes, and writers. Other kinds of sexism found were gender reinforcement, sex role stereotyping, gender domination, explicit sexuality, and active discrimination. Some of the more striking examples illustrate these categories. Discussion of gender issues occurred in only four observed classes, three of which were taught by females. The document concludes no unified effort is being made by most teachers or most middle schools to promote equity. (DK)

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Gender Equity and Gender Bias in the Middle School Classroom

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Atlanta , GA, April 1993.

SO 023 412

Gender Equity and Gender Bias in the Middle School Classroom

Implementation of the middle school philosophy in many schools across the country is relatively recent; in fact, in our home state of Connecticut, many schools are just beginning the transition from junior high school to middle school. As they are undergoing this transition, it is important for them to keep issues of gender equity firmly in focus.

Why are issues of gender equity especially vital in the middle school years? These years are a time of great developmental change, a time when both girls and boys are dealing with issues of gender identity. Additionally, these years often determine whether a student will participate in the "academic track" in high school, and thus determine future career choices and options. Finally, these years have been pinpointed as the period during which female interest in mathematics and science decline (Clewell et al., 1992).

Many studies have shown that girls' confidence in their ability to do mathematics starts dropping in sixth grade and continues to drop relative to boys throughout high school; significantly confidence in 8th grade is the strongest predictor of achievement in 11th grade mathematics for both boys and girls (Sherman, 1980). Despite equal achievement in mathematics of middle schools girls (Featherstone, 1986), something is happening to the girls to reduce their confidence. The question for educators is whether the cause of this lessening in confidence is the middle school classroom itself.

By age 11, boys view science as a masculine subject while girls see it as a gender-neutral field; however, by age 14, girls also begin to see science as the

domain of males (Skolnick, 1982). Again, the question must be asked whether what occurs in the classroom is a cause of, or a contributing factor to, this change of perception. Because of girls' lack of confidence and the conflict between feminine self-image and mathematics/science achievement, girls in high school often opt out of electing mathematics and science courses. Thus, middle school teachers play a pivotal role in persuading girls that science and mathematics are fields in which they can succeed and feel comfortable.

Studies of classrooms indicate that males and females sitting in the same classrooms may not be getting the same courses (Sadker and Sadker, 1986; AAUW, 1992). Boys are often asked higher order questions and are given more "wait-time" in answering questions (Hall, 1982). Research on middle school teachers' perceptions of gender issues showed that English and social studies teachers were more concerned with gender equity than were mathematics and science teachers (Seider and Shmurak, 1992). Few studies have examined the actual practices of middle school teachers in trying to achieve gender equity in their classrooms. Until such research occurs, it will not be known how large a role the middle school teacher and the middle school classroom play in the development of girls' attitudes towards subjects such as science and mathematics. If it can be shown to play a large part, then work can be begun to address these issues with these teachers.

The objective of this study was to begin to examine middle school classrooms for examples of either gender equity or gender bias. Although many studies have looked at gender bias, few have focused specifically on middle school classrooms; still fewer have looked for examples of gender equity.

We are, respectively, a female teacher educator who was once a middle school science teacher and a male middle school social studies teacher who is

now a graduate student. As part of a joint research project, we visited ten middle schools in central Connecticut, spending a day visiting each school. A total of 80 classes were visited, which included 6th, 7th and 8th grade classes in social studies, mathematics, science, language arts, foreign langauge, health, and an assortment of electives. Each class was observed in its entirety by at least one member of the team, who noted teacher behaviors, student participation, textbook or other instructional materials, and room decorations and displays.

During classroom visits, extensive notes were taken. At a later time, behaviors were categorized as either examples of gender equity or sexism, according to the system created by Lee, Marks and Knowles (1991). Lee categorizes six forms of sexism in classrooms: (a) gender reinforcement (perpetuation of conventional behaviors typically associated with being male or female), (b) embedded discrimination (sexism in linguistic usage, historical records, literary texts or visual displays), (c) sex role stereotyping (characterization of individuals according to expected social roles); (d) gender domination (prerogatives exercised by males in relation to females), (e) active discrimination (denying females opportunities available to males), and (f) explicit sexuality (treatment of females as sex objects). She also defines six forms of pro-active gender equity practices: (a) amelioration of inequitable practices (such as counseling girls to take calculus as a corrective to limited access in the past), (b) resistance to sex-role stereotyping (such as classroom displays that portray females in non-traditional professions), (c) compensatory recognition of female achievement (such as including women authors and women scientists in the curriculum), (d) sensitization to gender issues (actual discussion of sexism and equity in the class), (e) affirmation of girls' skills and abilities and (f) positive instructional strategies (such as

discussions of historical eras so that events are inclusive of the contributions of females). In fact, we found many interesting examples of most of these, as will be discussed below.

In addition, we recorded student participation in such a way that a gender equity ratio could be calculated as follows: Equity was defined to mean

$$\frac{\text{number of boys present}}{\text{number of girls present}} = \frac{\text{number of boys speaking}}{\text{number of girls speaking}}$$

Thus by dividing the ratio of boys speaking/girls speaking by the ratio of boys present/girls present, one gets a gender equity ratio; if the quotient equals 1.0, gender equity is achieved. A number considerably larger than 1.0 would indicate that boys were dominating the class; for example, a ratio of 2.0 would mean that boys were speaking proportionally twice as much as girls. On the other hand a number considerably smaller than 1.0 would indicate girls' domination of the class; a ratio of 0.5 would mean that girls were speaking proportionally twice as much as boys. We decided that any ratio between 0.8 and 1.2 was sufficiently close to 1.0 to be called "equity." Above 1.2, was called "male dominated" and below 0.8 was called "female dominated."

Results

We were able to determine the gender ratios for 64 of the 80 classes observed. In the other sixteen classes, students were doing individual projects or working in groups so that an overall ratio for the class could not be calculated. Of the 64 classes, 26 had participation ratios between 0.8 and 1.2, and thus could be categorized as equitable. Another 25 were male-dominated, with ratios from 1.25 to 10.11 , while only 13 were female-dominated, with ratios below 0.8. Table 1 shows our results in terms of subject taught.

Surprisingly, mathematics classes in our sample appear to be the most equitable, while language arts classes show the most extreme male domination; science, social studies, health and foreign languages fall somewhere in between. Table 2 displays these same ratios by subject and gender of teacher, and illustrates, again surprisingly, that the most extreme male bias in class participation in our sample takes place in language arts classrooms taught by female teachers. Table 3 displays these ratios again by school, showing that there can be great variation in gender ratio within a single school. Although our sample of urban schools is small, it appears that these schools are the only places one is as likely to find female-dominated classes as one is to find male-dominated or equitable classes; the suburban middle school sample shows more than half of the classes as equitable, but many male-dominated ones as well. The two small town schools show more than half of the classes as male-dominated.

Of the 80 classes observed, 22 were in language arts, 16 in social studies, 16 in science, 12 in mathematics, 5 in foreign language, 4 in health and 5 in various electives. As shown in Table 4, forty-one incidents that could be categorized as sexist by Lee's system were noted. Only six of these were related to the book in use, and were examples of embedded discrimination or sex role stereotyping; in many schools, the books are not chosen by the individual teacher, so the use of novels and short stories with only male protagonists, for example, may not be the fault of the classroom teacher. The other 35 incidents, however, were related directly to teacher practices. Seventeen of these had to do with posters hung by the teachers in their rooms: science rooms with pictures of only male scientists, social studies classrooms with only male historical figures, language arts rooms with only male writers - all examples of embedded discrimination. This was intensified by the fact that many of the

male teachers also decorated their rooms with posters of male athletes, which had nothing to do with the subject taught.

Other kinds of sexism are best illustrated by describing a few of the most striking examples. Gender reinforcement is best exemplified by the math teacher, who when asked by the principal's office to send students to pick up the newly arrived math textbooks, chose three male students to go and ignored the raised hands of the girls. Interestingly, two girls ignored the teacher and went along with the three boys. When the five students returned from the office, 2 boys and 2 girls carried boxes of books, and one boy came back empty-handed; the teacher's comment to the latter was "Well, you're no gentleman!" He never acknowledged in any way either the girls' disobedience or their proven ability to handle the task.

Sex role stereotyping appeared most blatantly in an anti-drug video which depicted a "typical" family in which the father, coming home from work, is greeted by his "happy homemaker" wife who rushed to make him his end-of-day martini. Gender domination appeared in two classes where group activities occurred; working in mixed gender groups, the boys in some groups were allowed by the teacher to sit back while the girls did all the work. Explicit sexuality occurred in a science classroom where a metric poster, dated 1974, was hung: one section of the poster showed the "Ms. Metrics contest," in which three women in bikinis, one thin, one fat, one stereotypically beautiful, were shown, along with their measurements in metric units.

Two examples of sexism directed *at males* by female teachers also occurred. In one foreign language class, in which the girls were clearly dominating (equity ratio = 0.45), when a boy finally answered a question, he was belittled with the comment "That was so easy even my ex-husband could have answered it!" We classified this as active discrimination. An example of

explicit sexuality occurred in a language arts class when a female teacher held up a photo of a scantily clad male model and described him as a "hunk." Table 5 gives a breakdown of sexist incident by gender of teacher and shows that teachers of both genders engage in such practices; gender reinforcement, however, seems to be much more likely with a male teacher, especially an older male teacher. Table 6 shows the distribution of sexist incident across schools and school types. Once again, even though one must be cautious of the small sample size, it seems that the urban school has the least sexism and the small town school the most.

There is not much consistency between the gender ratios in participation and the incidence of sexist practices. For example, a language arts classroom with posters of male athletes and reading assignments exclusively about males had a participation ratio of 0.47; the math classroom with the teacher who wouldn't let the girls carry books had a participation ratio of 0.69 - both female-dominated classes in a male/sexist environment.

Table 7 displays the occurrence of pro-active equity incidents. No incidents that could be categorized as "amelioration of inequitable practices" were observed during these classes, although such incidents may occur, particularly when teachers are counseling girls on a one-to-one basis. Resistance to stereotyping, compensatory recognition of female achievements and inclusive instructional strategies were all observed in the textbooks in use. Indeed, of the 47 pro-active equity incidents noted, about half (23) were due to the textbook chosen. Again, it is not clear that classroom teachers are responsible for choosing the textbook. Many science textbooks, for example, now show women in non-traditional scientific careers (resistance to stereotyping) and include profiles of notable women scientists (compensatory recognition); the use of such a science book was noted in the classroom of the

male teacher who hung the Ms. Metrics poster. Social studies textbooks have become much more cognizant of the the lives of women in the time periods under discussion (inclusive instructional strategies), and yet it was observed that the teachers using these books posted timelines with all-male events, even when the books themselves had more inclusive timelines. Contributions of famous women (compensatory recogniton of women's achievements) were found exclusively in textbooks, as were inclusive instructional strategies such as including an equal number of male and female writers. Not one teacher, male or female, had chosen to display posters of famous women scientists or historical figures; only one language arts teacher displayed posters of female writers..

Twenty-four incidents of equity that were directly related to teacher practices were observed. Resistance to stereotyping was shown in posters that displayed women in nontraditional roles in language arts, social studies, math and foreign language classrooms; women were shown as editors-in-chief of newspapers, as judges, astronauts, scientists, and heads of state. This was never observed in any of the 16 science classrooms, however. In science classrooms, decorations tended to be gender-neutral (flowers, animals, planets) or male (ubiquitous posters of Albert Einstein, but not even one of Marie Curie).

Discussion of gender issues occurred in only four observed classes, three of which were taught by females. Table 8 shows the distribution of equity incident by gender of teacher. Two of these were discussions of usage of words ("pretty" vs "handsome" and "man" vs. "human") and two were discussions of gender distinctions as they appeared in a Spanish song and an African myth. Affirmation of girls' skills was noted seven times, twice by female teachers (for good word choice and good connections between ideas)

and five times by male teachers (for good problem-solving, good questions, and overall ability). Girls' skills were observed to be affirmed in all academic subjects. Table 9 illustrates the distribution of equity incidents across the ten schools, and shows how large a variation in equity incidents may occur. In several of the suburban schools, the textbooks provided the only instances of equity; this was true in one urban and one small town school as well. On the other hand, some schools provided many more instances of equity practices by the teachers themselves.

Discussion:

Perhaps our most surprising finding was that participation in mathematics and science classes tended to be quite equitable, and as often female-dominated as it was male-dominated. In fact, language arts classes and social studies classes accounted for 65% of the male-dominated classes. Thus, we do not see, on the basis of our sample, girls in middle schools withdrawing from active participation in science and mathematics. Nor did we find any difference in the patterns of participation in these mathematics and science classes based on gender of teacher, a finding that is at variance with studies in high school and college classes, such as Krupnick (1992), that have found girls more likely to participate when the class is taught by a female teacher.

Sexist incidents were not found to cluster in any one subject nor to occur more often with male rather than female teachers. Whereas Lee et al (1991) found the chemistry classroom to be a very sexist place in the high school, the science classrooms we observed in middle schools were not; we saw no active discrimination, sex role stereotyping or gender domination in any science classroom. Posters of male scientists, most often Einstein, do abound in physical science classrooms, and there was one example of explicit sexuality in

the outdated Ms. Metrics poster, but biological science classrooms tended to be very gender neutral (flowers and animals were the chief decor). Similarly, the math classroom is generally gender neutral. On the other hand, males dominated the bulletin boards of language arts and social studies classrooms, with male writers (Mark Twain is a frequent one, perhaps because of his Hartford roots) and male historical figures in the overwhelming majority. Posters of male athletes occur in many classrooms of male teachers, themselves perhaps coaches or former athletes, independent of subject.

When we looked at pro-active gender equity incidents, however, we found few in either mathematics or science classes that were not related to the textbooks. Only one mathematics teacher had chosen to display a poster that showed a woman in a non-traditional role, and no science teachers had done so. Perhaps in fields like math and science, that are still societally defined as male, it is not enough to be gender neutral. It may be that middle school mathematics and science teachers need to become pro-active in resisting society's stereotypes and affirming that mathematics and science are fields in which females can achieve, in order to counteract the messages that their female students may be receiving elsewhere.

The companies that publish textbooks for the middle school classroom have certainly made the effort to be inclusive of women (and minorities) in their books, especially those in science and social studies. Perhaps they could make available posters to use along with these books that highlight some of the women pictured in the texts; this would provide teachers with some more equitable materials with which to decorate their rooms. Teachers too have to take some responsibility for decorating their rooms in equitable ways; we saw all too many classrooms decorated with exclusively white males (and the occasional Martin Luther King).

We noticed too that some teachers are not only lagging behind their textbooks in terms of gender equity - they are also lagging behind their students! The math teacher mentioned above who did not think his female students could carry piles of textbooks as well as the boys (even though some of the girls were actually larger) was simply ignored by some of his female students. Another teacher, who was using an extremely female-inclusive world history textbook, had to be reminded by his students that women lived in Rome too, and even after they reminded him, he persisted in referring to them as "wives." We also observed one instance in which a teacher had written the traditional "man vs. man, man vs. nature, man vs. society" on the blackboard as an introduction to a discussion of myths; her students, who refused to accept "man" as inclusive of "woman," would not let her continue until she returned to the blackboard to put "wo/man" in every place she had written "man." Thus we are seeing some middle school students who are more sensitive to issues of gender equity than their teachers. Whether they are getting this sensitivity from parents, from other teachers, from the mass media, or even from their textbooks we don't know, but it is one more reason why the middle school teacher needs to raise his/her awareness of gender equity.

Thus, we saw evidence that many textbook publishers, some middle school students and some middle school teachers are actively promoting gender equity. We have noted, however, that many sexist incidents and male-dominated classes still occur. The fact that many classrooms combine both sexist and equity incidents indicates that no unified effort is being made by most teachers or most middle schools to promote equity. Further, the fact that teachers' perceptions about their sensitivity to gender equity (as shown in Seider and Shmurak, 1992) seldom matches their actual practices is another

cause for concern. All of these are issues that deserve to be examined further by those doing research in middle level education.

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TABLE 1. GENDER EQUITY RATIOS - BY SUBJECT AREA

Bias	LangArts	Soc.St.	Science	Math	For.Lang.	Health
Male	10.11	2.83	2.30	1.31	2.50	2.56
	3.17	2.32	1.50	1.25	1.26	2.21
	2.20	2.26	1.38			
	1.99	1.80				
	1.90	1.50				
	1.67	1.31				
	1.56					
	1.52					
	1.29					
	1.28					
Equity	1.17	1.02	1.10	1.09	1.08	.90
	1.07	1.01	1.00	1.06	.82	
	.99	1.00	.88	1.03		
	.92	.97		.94		
	.85	.89		.93		
	.81	.85		.92		
		.83		.90		
Female	.75	.60	.75	.69	.45	.64
	.67	.42	.62	.53		
	.47		.48	.53		

TABLE 2 . GENDER EQUITY RATIOS - BY SUBJECT AND TEACHER'S GENDER

Gender	LangArts	Soc.St.	Science	Math	For.Lang.	Health
	1.56	2.83	1.50			
	1.28	2.26	1.38			2.21
		1.80				
		1.50				
	1.17	1.02	1.00	1.09		
Male		1.01		1.06		
		.97				
		.85				
		.83				
	.75		.75	.69		
	.47		.62	.53		.64
			.48	.53		
Female	10.11	2.32	2.30	1.31	2.50	2.56
	3.17	1.31		1.25	1.26	
	2.20					
	1.99					
	1.90					
	1.67					
	1.52					
	1.29					
	1.07	1.00	1.10	1.03	1.08	.90
	.99	.89	.88	.94	.82	
	.92			.93		
	.85			.92		
	81			.90		
	.67	.60				
		.42			.45	

TABLE 3. GENDER EQUITY RATIOS - BY SUBJECT AND SCHOOL

	LangArts	Soc.St.	Science	Math	For Lang	Health
Suburban						
School # 2	1.99 1.90	1.00 .60	1.31	.82 1.25	2.56	.90
#4	1.52 1.07	.89	1.50 .75	.94 .92		
#5	10.11 .85	.85	1.00	1.09 .69	2.50	(33 classes: 3 F 18 E 12 M)
#6		1.01		.93		
#10	1.28 .99	2.83 1.02 .83	2.30	1.03 .90		
Urban						
School # 3	2.20 1.67 .81	2.26	1.38 .62	.53 .53		
# 7	1.17 .75	.97	.88	1.06	1.26 1.08	(19 classes: 7 F 6 E 6 M)
# 8	.67	1.31 .42	.48			
Town						
School # 1	3.17 1.56	2.32	1.10		.45	2.21 .64
# 9	1.29 .92 .47	1.80 1.50				(12 classes: 3 F 2 E 7 M)

TABLE 4. SEXIST INCIDENTS - BY SUBJECT

	LangArts	Soc.St.	Science	Math	For.Lang.	Health
Gender Reinforce.	1 (remark)	2 (remark)	1 (remark)	1 (remark)		
Embedded Discrimin.	10 (6 posters 4 books)	8 (6 posters 1 usage 1 video)	4 (3 posters 1 book)	2 (1 problems 1 usage)	4 (poster, timeline, myths,usage)	
Sex role Stereotype		1 (remark)			1 (book)	1 (video)
Gender Domination	1 (girls do all work)	1				
Active Discrimin.					1 (remark)	
Explicit Sexuality	1 (remark)		1 (poster)			

Total : 41 incidents

17 posters
6 books
5 gender reinforcement (3 by older male teachers)
4 usage
2 videos
2 girls expected to do all the work, 5 other
(35 related to teacher practices)

TABLE 5. SEXIST INCIDENTS - BY GENDER OF TEACHER

	Male	Female
Gender Reinforce.	4	1
Embedded Discrimin.	12	16
Sex role Stereotype	2	1
Gender Domination	1	1
Active Discrimin.		1
Explicit Sexuality	1	1
Total:	20	21

(out of 32 males and 46 females)

TABLE 6. SEXIST INCIDENTS - BY SCHOOL

	Suburban:					Urban:			Town:	
	2	4	5	6	10	3	7	8	1	9
Gender Reinforce.		2	2		1					
Embed. Discrimin.	2	3	1	2	3	4	2	3	4	4
Sex role Stereotype				1					2	
Gender Domination	1				1					
Active Discrimin.									1	
Explicit Sexuality		1	1							
Totals:	3	6	4	3	5	4	2	3	7	4
			21				9			11

TABLE 7. PRO-ACTIVE EQUITY INCIDENTS - BY SUBJECT

	LangArts	Soc.St.	Science	Math	For.Lang	Health
Ameliorate ineq. practice						
Resistance to stereotype	3 (2 posters 1 remark)	6 (1 poster 4 remarks 1 sentence)	7 (6 books 1 film)	3 (2 book 1 poster)	1 (poster)	
Compensat. Recognition	3 (2 book 1 poster)	2 (books)	3 (books)			
Sensitization to gender issues	1(usage)				3 (song,myth,usage)	
Affirmation of Girls' Skills	1 (remark)	3 (remarks)	1 (remark)	1 (remark)	1 (remark)	
Instructional Strategies	4 (books)	3 (book)	1 (book)			

Total : 47 incidents

23 are book-related
16 teacher remarks
6 posters
1 sentence in assignment
1 film

(24 related to teacher practices)

TABLE 8. PRO-ACTIVE EQUITY INCIDENTS - BY GENDER OF TEACHER

Ameliorate ineq. practice	Male	Female
Resistance to stereotype	11	11
Compensat. Recognition	2	5
Sensitization to gender issues	1	2
Affirmation of Girls' Skills	5	2
Instructional Strategies	3	5
Total:	22	25
	(out of 32)	(out of 46)

TABLE 9. EQUITY INCIDENTS - BY SCHOOL

	Suburban:					Urban:			Town:	
	2	4	5	6	10	3	7	8	1	9
Ameliorate ineq. practice										
Resist. stereotype	3	2	1	2	3	3	3	1	2	
Comp. Recognition	1				1	2			2	2
Sens. to gender issues	1						3			
Affirmation of Girls' Skills					2		2	2		1
Instr. Strategies	1	1			1		1	1		3
Totals:	6	3	1	2	7	5	9	4	4	6
			19				18		10	